# The Honor of the Big Snows

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### CHAPTER IV.

#### The Fight at Dawn.

IT was a new team. It had come from the trails to the east, and Jan's heart gave a sudden jump as he thought of the missionary who was expected with the overdue mail. At first he had a mind to intercept the figure laboring across the open, but without apparent reason he changed his course and approached the sledge.

As he came nearer he observed a second figure, which rose from behind

He Shot Out a Powerful Fist and Sent the Boy Reeling to the Ground.

the dogs and advanced to meet him. A dozen paces ahead of the team it stopped and waited.

"Our dogs are so near exhaustion that we're afraid to take them any nearer," said a voice. "They'd die like poppies under those packs!"

The voice thrilled Jan. He advanced with his back to the fire, so that he could see the stranger.

"You come from Churchill?" he asked.

His words were hardly a question. They were more of an excuse for him to draw nearer, and he turned a little, so that for an instant the glowing fire flashed in his eyes.

"Yes; we started from the Etawney just a week ago today."

Jan had come very near. The stranger interrupted himself to stare into the thin, fierce face that had grown like a white cameo almost within reach of him. With a startled cry he drew a step back, and Jan's violin dropped to the snow.

For no longer than a breath there was silence. The man wormed himself back into the shadows inch by inch, followed by the white face of the boy. Then there came shrilly from Jan's lips the mad shrieking of a name, and his knife flashed as he leaped at the other's breast.

The stranger was quicker than he. With a sudden movement he cleared himself of the blow, and as Jan's arm went past him, the point of the knife ripping his coat sleeve, he shot out a powerful fist and sent the boy reeling to the ground.

Stunned and bleeding, Jan dragged himself to his knees. He saw the dogs turning, heard a low voice urging them to the trail and saw the sledge disappear into the forest. He staggered from his knees to his feet and stood swaying in his weakness. Then he followed.

He forgot that he was leaving his knife in the snow, forgot that back there about the fire there were other dogs and other men. He followed, sickened by the blow, but gaining strength as he pursued. Ahead of him he could hear the sound of the toboggan and the cautious lashing of a whip over the backs of the tired huskies. The sounds filled him with fierce strength. He wiped away the warm trickle of blood that ran over his cheek and began to run, slowly at first, swinging in the easy wolf lope of the forest runner, with his elbows close to his sides.

At that pace he could have followed for hours, losing when the pack took a spurt, gaining when they lagged, an insistent Nemesis just behind when the weighted dogs lay down in their traces. When he heard the cracking of the whip growing fainter he dropped his arms straight to his sides and ran more swiftly, his brain reeling with the madness of his desire to reach the sledge, to drag from it the man who had struck him, to choke life from the face that haunted that mental picture of his grinning at him and gloating always from the shadow world, just beyond the pale, sweet loveliness of the woman who lived in it.

He did not feel the soft snow packed under the beat of his feet. He received the lash of low hanging bushes without experiencing the sensation of their sting. Only he knew that he wanted air—more and more air—and to get it he ran with open mouth, struggling and gasping for it and yet not knowing that Jean de Gravois would have called him a fool for the manner in which he sought it.

He heard more and more faintly the run of the sledge. Then he heard it no longer. His heart swelled in a final bursting effort, and he plunged on until at last his legs crumpled under him and he pitched face downward in the snow, like a thing stung by sudden death.

It was then, with his scratched and bleeding face, lying in the snow, that reason began to return to him. After a little while he dragged himself weakly to his knees, still panting from the mad effort he had made to overtake the sledge. From a great distance he heard faintly the noise of shouting, the whispering echo of half a hundred voices, and he knew that the sound came from the revelers at the post. It was proof to him that there had been no interruption to the carnival and that the scene at the edge of the forest had been witnessed by none. He turned again on the trail.

Where the forest broke into an open, lighted by the stars, he found blood in the footprints of the leading dog. Halfway across the open he saw where the leader had swung out from the trail and the others of the pack had crowded about him, to be urged on by the lashings of the man's whip. Other signs of the pack's growing exhaustion followed close.

The man now traveled beside the sledge where the trail was rough and rode where it was smooth and hard. The deep imprints of his heeled boots in the soft snow showed that he ran for only a short distance at a time—a hundred yards or less—and that after each running spell he brought the pack to a walk. He was heavy and lacked endurance, and this discovery brought a low cry of exultation to Jan's lips.

He fell into a dog trot. Mile after mile dropped behind him. Other miles were ahead of him, an endless wilderness of miles, and through them the pack persisted, keeping always beyond sound and vision.

The stars began fading out of the skies. Jan followed more and more slowly. There was hard breathing effort now in his running—effort that caused him physical pain and discomfort. His feet stumbled occasionally in the snow. His legs from thigh to knee began to ache with the gnawing torment that centers in the marrow bone, and with this beginning of the "runner's cramp" he was filled with a new and poignant terror.

Would the dogs beat him out? Slonging in his trail, bleeding at every foot, would they still drag their burden beyond the reach of his vengeance? The fear fastened itself upon him, urging him to greater effort, and he called upon the last of his strength in a spurt that carried him to where the thick spruce gave place to thin bush and the bush to the barren and rocky side of a huge ridge, up which the trail climbed strong and well defined. For a few paces he followed it, then slipped and rolled back as the fatal paralysis deadened all power of movement in his limbs. He lay where he fell, moaning out his grief with wide staring eyes turned straight up into the cold gray of the starless sky.

For a long time he was motionless. Then he began slowly to crawl up the trail. Some of the dull, paralytic ache was gone from his limbs, and as he worked his blood began to warm them into new strength until he stood up and sniffed like an animal in the wind that was coming over the ridge from the south.

There was something in that wind that thrilled him. It stung his nostrils to a quick sensing of the nearness of something that was human. He smelled smoke. In it there was the pungent odor of green balsam mixed with a faint perfume of pitch pine, and because the odor of pitch grew stronger as he ascended he knew that it was a small fire that was making the smoke, with none of the fierce, dry woods to burn up the smell. It was a fire hidden among the rocks, a tiny fire, over which the fleeing missioner was cooking his breakfast.

Jan almost moaned aloud in his gladness, and the old mad strength returned to his body. Near the summit of the ridge he picked up a club. It was a short, thick club with the heavy end knotted and twisted.

Cautiously he lifted his face over the rocks and looked out upon a plateau still deep in snow swept bare by the winter's winds and covered with rocks and bushes. His face was so white that at a little distance it might have been taken for a snow hare. It went whiter when a few yards away he saw the fire, the man and the dogs.

The man was close to the little blaze, his broad shoulders hunched over, steadying a small pot over the flame. Beyond him were the dogs huddled about the sledge, inanimate as death.

Jan drew himself over the rocks. Once he had seen a big footed lynx creep upon a wide awake fox, and, like that lynx, he crept upon the man beside the fire. One of the tired dogs moved, and his pointed nostrils quivered in the air. Jan lay flat in the snow. Then the dog's muzzle dropped between his paws, and the boy moved on.

Inch by inch he advanced. The inches multiplied themselves into a foot, the foot lengthened into yards, and still the man remained hunched over his simmering pot. In a flash Jan took the last leap, and his club crashed down upon the missioner's head. The man pitched over like a log, and, with a shrill cry, the boy was at his throat.

"I am Jan Thoreau!" he shrieked. "I am Jan Thoreau—Jan Thoreau—come to keel you!" He dropped his club and was upon the man's chest, his slender fingers tightening like steel wire about the thick throat of his enemy. "I keel you slow—slow!" he cried as the missioner struggled weakly.

The great thick body heaved under him, and he put all his strength into his hands. Something struck him in the face. Something struck him again and again, but he felt neither the pain nor the force of it, and his voice sobbed out his triumph as he choked. The man's hands reached up and tore at his hair, but Jan saw only the missioner's mottled face growing more mottled and his eyes staring in greater agony up into his own.

"I am Jan Thoreau," he panted again and again. "I am Jan Thoreau, an' I keel you—keel you!"

The blood poured from his face. It blinded him until he could no longer see the one from which he was choking life. He bent down his head to escape the blows. The man's body heaved more and more; it turned until he was half under it, but still he hung to the thick throat, as the weasel hangs in tenacious death to the jugular of its prey.

The missioner's weight was upon him in crushing force now. His huge hands struck and tore at the boy's head

There Was Death in Each of the Two Grips.

and face, and then they had fastened themselves at his neck. Jan was conscious of a terrible effort to take in breath, but he was not conscious of pain. The clutch did not frighten him. It did not make him loosen his grip. His fingers dug deeper. He strove to cry out still his words of triumph, but he could make no sound, except a gasping like that which came from between the gaping jaws of the man whose life his body and soul were fighting to smother.

There was death in each of the two grips, but the man's was stronger, and his neck was larger and tougher, so that after a time he staggered to his knees and then to his feet, while Jan lay upon his back, his face and hair red with blood, his eyes wide open and with a lifeless glare in them. The missioner looked down upon his victim in horror. As the life that had nearly ebbed out of him poured back into his body he staggered among the dogs, fastened them to the sledge and urged them down the mountain into the plain. There was soon no sound of the sledge.

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Half a mile down the ridge, where it sloped up gradually from the forests and swamps of the plain, a team of powerful malemutes were running at the head of a toboggan. On the sledge was a young half Cree woman. Now beside the sledge, now at the head of the dogs, cracking his whip and shouting joyously, ran Jean de Gravois.

He was bringing back with him a splendid young woman with big lustrous eyes and hair that shone with the gloss of a raven's wing in the sun. She laughed at him proudly as he danced and leaped beside her, replying softly in Cree, which is the most beautiful language in the world, to everything that he said.

Jean leaped and ran, cracked his caribou whip and shouted and sang until he was panting and red in the face. Just as Iowaka had called upon him to stop and get a second wind the malemutes dropped back upon their haunches where Jan Thoreau lay twisted and bleeding in the snow.

"What is this?" cried Jean.

He caught Jan's limp head and shoulders up in his arms and called shrilly to Iowaka, who was disentangling herself from the thick furs in which he had wrapped her.

"It is the fiddler. I told you about who lives with Williams at Post Lac Bain!" he shouted excitedly in Cree. "He has been murdered. He has been choked to death and torn to pieces in the face as if by an animal!" Jean's eyes roved about as Iowaka kneeled beside him. "What a fight!" he gasped. "See the footprints—a big man and a small boy, and the murderer has gone on a sledge!"

"He is warm," said Iowaka. "It may be that he is not dead."

Jean de Gravois sprang to his feet, his little black eyes flashing with a dangerous fire. In a single leap he was at the side of the sledge throwing off the furs and bundles and all other objects around his rifle.

"He is dead, Iowaka. Look at the purple and black in his face. It is Jean de Gravois who will catch the murderer, and you will stay here and make yourself a camp. Hi-o-o-o-o!" he shouted to the malemutes.

The team twisted sinuously and swiftly in the trail as he sped over the edge of the mountain. Upon the plain below he knelt upon the toboggan, with his rifle in front of him, and at his low, hissing commands, which reached no farther than the dogs' ears, the team stretched their long bodies in pursuit of the missioner and his huskies.

Jean knew that whoever was ahead of him was not far away, and he laughed and hunched his shoulders when he saw that his magnificent malemutes were making three times the speed of the huskies. It was a short chase. It led across the narrow plain and into a dense tangle of swamp, where the huskies had picked their way in aimless wandering until they came out in thick balsam and Banksian pine. Half a mile farther on, and the trail broke into an open which led down to the smooth surface of a lake, and two-thirds across the lake was the fleeing missioner.

### CHAPTER V.

#### For Her.

THE malemute leader flung open his jaws in a deep baying triumph, and with a savage yell Jean cracked his caribou whip over his back. He saw the man ahead of him lean over the end of his sledge as he urged his dogs, but the huskies went no faster, and then he caught a glitter of something that flashed for a moment in the sun.

"Ah!" said Jean softly as a bullet sang over his head. "He fires at Jean de Gravois!" He dropped his whip, and there was a warm glow of happiness in his little dark face as he leveled his rifle over the backs of his malemutes. "He fires at Jean de Gravois, and it is Jean who can hamstring a caribou at 300 yards on the run!"

For an instant, at the crack of his rifle there was no movement ahead, then something rolled from the sledge and lay doubled up in the snow. A hundred yards beyond it the huskies stopped in a rabble and turned to look at the approaching strangers.

Beside it Jean stopped, and when he saw the face that stared up at him, he clutched his thin hands in his long black hair and cried out in shrill amazement and horror:

"The saints in heaven, it is the missioner from Churchill!"

He turned the man over and found where his bullet had entered under one arm and come out from under the other. There was no spark of life left. The missioner was already dead.

"The missioner from Churchill!" he gasped again.

He looked up at the warm sun and kicked the melting snow under his moccasined feet.

"It will thaw very soon," he said to himself, looking again at the dead man, "and then he will go into the lake."

He headed his malemutes back to the forest. Then he ran out and cut the traces of the exhausted huskies, and with his whip scattered them in freedom over the ice.

"Go to the wolves!" he shouted in Cree. "Hide yourselves from the post, or Jean de Gravois will cut out your tongues and take your skins off alive!"

When he came back to the top of the mountain Jean found Iowaka making hot coffee, while Jan was bundled up in furs near the fire.

"It is as I said," she called. "He is alive!"

Thus it happened that the return of Jean de Gravois to the post was even more dramatic than he had schemed it to be, for he brought back with him not only a beautiful wife from Churchill, but also the half dead Jan Thoreau from the scene of battle on the mountain. And in the mystery of it all he reveled for two days, for Jean de Gravois said not a word about the dead man on the lake beyond the forest, nor did the huskies come back into their bondage to give a hint of the missing missionary.

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From the day after the caribou roast the fur gatherers began scattering. The Eskimos left the next morning. On the second day Mukee's people from the west set off along the edge of the Barrens. Most of the others left by ones and twos into the wilderness to the south and east.

Less than a dozen still put off their return to the late spring trapping, and among these were Jean de Gravois and his wife. Jean waited until the third day. Then he went to see Jan. The boy was bolstered up in his cot, with Cummins balancing the little Melisse on the edge of the bed when he came in.

For a time Jean sat and watched them in silence. Then he made a sign to Cummins, who joined him at the door.

"I am going the Athabasca way today," he said. "I wish to talk with the boy before I go. I have a word to say to him which no ears should hear but his own. Will it be right?"

"Talk to him as long as you like," said Cummins, "but don't worry him about the missionary. You'll not get a word from him."

Jan's eyes spoke with a devotion greater than words as Jean de Gravois came and sat close beside him. He knew that it was Jean who had brought him alive into the post.

"Ah, it was wan be-e-a-n-tiful fight," he said softly. "You are a brave boy, Jan Thoreau!"

"You did not see it?" asked Jan.

Unconsciously the words came from him in French. Jean caught one of his thin hands and laughed joyfully, for the spirit of him was French to the bottom of his soul.

"I see it? No, neither I nor Iowaka, but there it was in the snow, as plain as the eyes in your face. And did I not follow the trail that staggered down the mountain, while Iowaka brought you back to life? And when I came to the lake did I not see something black out upon it, like a charred log? And when I came to it was it not the dead body of the missioner from Churchill? Eh, Jan Thoreau?"

Jan sat up in his bed, with a sharp cry.

"The thaw will open up the lake in a few days. Then he will go down in the first slush." And Jean looked about him cautiously again and whispered low—"if you see anything about the dead missioner that you do not understand think of Jean de Gravois."

He rose to his feet and bent over Jan's white face.

"I am going the Athabasca way today," he finished. "Perhaps, Jan Thoreau, you will hear after a time that it would be best for Jean de Gravois never to return again to this Post Lac Bain. If so you will find him between Fond du Lac and the Beaver river." He passed out.

When Cummins returned he found Jan's cheeks flushed and the boy in a fever.

"Devil take that Gravois!" he growled.

"He has been a brother to me," said Jan simply. "I love him."

On the second day after the Frenchman's departure Jan rose free of the fever which had threatened him for a time, and in the afternoon he harnessed Cummins' dogs. The last of the trappers had started from the post that morning, their sledges and dogs sinking heavily in the deepening slush, and Jan set off over the smooth toboggan trail made by the company's agent in his return to Fort Churchill.

This trail followed close along the base of the ridge upon which he had fought the missionary, joining that of Jean de Gravois miles beyond. Jan climbed the ridge. From where he had made his attack he followed the almost obliterated trail of the Frenchman and his malemutes until he came to the lake, and then he knew that Jean de Gravois had spoken the truth, for he found the missionary with his face half buried in the slush, stark dead.

He no longer had to guess at the meaning of Jean's words. The bullet hole under the dead man's arms was too large to escape eyes like Jan's. Into the little hidden world which he treasured in his heart there came another face, to remain always with him—the face of the courageous little forest dandy who was hurrying with his bride back into the country of the Athabasca.

From that night Jan's eyes were no longer filled with the nervous, glittering flashes which at times had given him an appearance almost of madness in place of their searching suspicions, there was a warmer and more companionable glow, and Cummins felt the effect of the change.

A Cree trapper had found Jan's violin in the snow and had brought it to Mukelia. Before Cummins finished his supper the boy began to play, and he continued to play until the lights at the post went out and both the man and the child were deep in sleep. Then Jan stopped. There was the fire of a keen wakefulness in his eyes as he carefully unfastened the strings of his instrument and held it close to the oil lamp, so that he could peer down through the narrow aperture in the box.

He looked again at Cummins. The man was sleeping with his face to the wall. With the hooked wire which he used for cleaning his revolver Jan fished gently at the very end of the box, and after three or four efforts the wire caught in something soft, which he pulled toward him. Through the bulge in the "f" hole he dragged forth a small, tightly rolled cylinder of faded red cloth.

For a few moments he sat watching the deep breathing of Cummins, unrolling the cloth as he watched, until he had spread out upon the table before him a number of closely written pages of paper. He weighted them at one end with his violin and held them down at the other with his hands. The writing was in French. Several of the pages were in a heavy masculine hand, the words running one upon another so closely that in places they seemed to be connected, and from them Jan took his fingers, so that they rolled up like a spring. Over the others he bent his head, and there came from him a low, sobbing breath.

On these pages the writing was that of a woman, and from the paper there still rose a faint, sweet scent of heliotrope. For half an hour Jan gazed upon them, reading the words slowly until he came to the last page.

A new and strange longing crept into his heart. He stretched out his arms, with the papers and his violin clutched in his hands, as if a wonderful spirit was calling to him.

For the first time in his lonely life it came to him—this call of the great world beyond the wilderness—and suddenly he crushed the woman's letter to his lips, and his voice burst from him in whispering, thrilling eagerness:

"I will come to you—some day—w'en ze leetle Melisse come too."

He rolled the written pages together, wrapped them in the faded red cloth and concealed them again in the box of his violin before he re-entered the cabin.

The next morning Cummins stood in the door and said:

"How warm the sun is! The snow and ice are going, Jan. It's spring. We'll house the sledges today and begin feeding the dogs on fish."

Each day thereafter the sun rose earlier, the day was longer and the air was warmer, and with the warmth there now came the sweet scents of the budding earth and the myriad sounds of the deep, unseen life of the forest awakening from its long slumber in its bed of snow.

The post fell back into its old ways. Now and then a visitor came in from out of the forest, but he remained for only a day or two, taking back into the solitude with him a few of the necessaries of life. Williams was busy preparing his books for the coming of the company's chief agent from London, and Cummins, who was helping the factor, had a good deal of extra time on his hands.

Before the last of the snow was gone he and Jan began dragging in logs for an addition which they planned for the little cabin. Basking out in the sun, with a huge bearskin for a floor, Melisse looked upon the new home building with wonderful demonstrations of interest. Cummins' face glowed with pleasure as she kicked and scrambled on the bearskin and gave shrill voiced approval of their efforts.

Jan was the happiest youth in the world. It was certain that the little Melisse, nearly six months old, understood what they were doing.

As the weather grew warmer and spring changed into summer Jan took Melisse upon short excursions with him into the forests, and he picked for her great armfuls of flowers and arctic ferns. The grave was never without fresh offerings, and the cabin, with its new addition complete, was always filled with the beautiful things that spring up out of the earth.

Jan and Melisse were happy, and in the joys of these two there was pleasure for the others of the post, as there had been happiness in the presence of the woman. Only upon Cummins had there settled a deep grief. The changes of spring and summer, bringing with them all that this desolate world held of warmth and beauty, filled him with the excruciating pain of his great grief, as if the woman had died but yesterday.

At last, his gaunt frame thinned by sleepless nights and days of mental torture, he said that the company's business was calling him to Churchill, and early in August he left for the bay. He left Melisse in care of Jan, and the child seemed to recognise the guardianship.

When Cummins came back from Fort Churchill in the autumn he brought with him a pack full of things for Melisse, including new books and papers, for which he had spent a share of his season's earnings. As he was freeing these treasures from their wrapping of soft caribou skin, with Jan and Melisse both looking on, he stopped suddenly and glanced from his knees up at the boy.

"They're wondering over at Churchill what became of the missionary who left with the mail, Jan. They say he was last seen at the Etawney."

"And not here?" replied Jan quickly.

"Not that they know of," said Cummins, still keeping his eyes on the boy. "The man who drove him never got back to Churchill. They're wondering where the driver went too. A company officer has gone up to the Etawney, and it is possible he may come over to Lac Bain. I don't believe he'll find the missionary."

"Neither do I," said Jan quite coolly. "He is probably dead, and the wolves and foxes have eaten him before this—or mebby ze feesh!"

Cummins resumed his task of unpacking, and among the books which he brought forth there were two which he gave to Jan.

"The supply ship from London came in while I was at Churchill, and those came with it," he explained. "They're schoolbooks. There's going to be a school at Churchill next winter, and the winter after that it will be at York factory, down on the Hayes." He settled back on his heels and looked at Jan. "It's the first school that has ever come nearer than 400 miles of us. That's at Prince Albert."

For many succeeding days Jan took long walks alone in the forest trails and silently thrashed out the two problems which Cummins had brought back from Churchill for him. Should he warn Jean de Gravois that a company officer was investigating the disappearance of the missionary?

At first his impulse was to go at once into Jean's haunts beyond Fond du Lac and give him the news, but even if the officer did come to Post Lac Bain how would he know that the missionary was at the bottom of the lake and that Jean de Gravois was accountable for it? So in the end Jan decided that it would be folly to stir up the little hunter's fears, and he thought no more of the company's investigator who had gone up to the Etawney.

(Continued Next Saturday)